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MRS. F. L. GAY

April 4, 1917

AN
AGED MINISTER'S REVIEW
OF THE
EVENTS AND DUTIES
OF FIFTY YEARS:

A Sermon,

PREACHED AT STOW, OCT. 11, 1824.

BY JONATHAN NEWELL,
PASTOR OF THE CHURCH.

EVEN TO YOUR OLD AGE, I AM HE ; AND EVEN TO HOARY
HAIRS, WILL I CARRY YOU....Isaiah 46, 4.

CONCORD, MASS. :
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1825.

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Mrs. G. L. Gay

SERMON.

ST. LUKE, XVI. 2.

“GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF THY STEWARDSHIP.”

The design of this parable is to teach us the importance of improving faithfully the talents that are bestowed upon us ; and we should realize that there is no one of the human race, who has not the witness in himself, of the being of God—that he must be obeyed and honored. For although our infinitely wise Creator has been pleased to bestow the light of understanding in different degrees to different men ; some have their minds so elevated and enlarged, as to be able to comprehend the most abstruse laws of philosophy, to account for those new appearances in the material world, which fill the minds of others with wonder and fear ; but even they must feel their dependence, and that they are accountable to that Supreme Being, who bestowed such gifts upon them ; and although this first principle of Religion is not implanted in the understanding by education, yet as we are so much under the influence of our senses, and the concerns of this life, it is of essential importance to help us to improve the light of nature, that the mind should be early and carefully cultivated, by being taught the knowledge of the one living and true God, and the duty we owe to him, just as it is necessary to cultivate the seed of vegetables, to water it, and to remove from it those noxious weeds which might otherwise prevent its growth.

This sense of dependence and accountability, has been felt ever since intelligent beings existed. The first of the human race, was distinguished from all the other creatures of this world, by the gift of reason, by which he was able to discover the perfection of the Creator, and by his intuitive knowledge to discover the use and design of the various works he beheld, which afforded such an impressive sense of the wisdom, power, and goodness of God, as to convince him of his dependence, and that he was accountable to him for his conduct. This impression was evidenced, by his attempt to hide himself from the presence of God in the garden, after he had transgressed the prohibition of his Maker.

The same principle, a lively sense of dependence, and accountability manifested itself in the conduct of Cain, after he had murdered his brother; every object he saw, the face of his parents, his widowed sister, the altar on which he had laid the expression of his sense of God, all reproached him for his wickedness, and arraigned him before the righteous tribunal of God: And that he might escape from the horrors of his own reflections, the sacred history informs us that he went out from the presence of the Lord; he fled from the place where the worship of God and the ordinances of religion were continually admonishing him of his wickedness. The natural consequences of the example of such a depraved parent, was manifested in the dissolute lives of his descendants; that as the scripture expresses it, *every imagination of the thoughts of the heart was only to evil.*

This was the state of the world until Noah lived, that he might be a witness for God, to his family, which after the destruction of the old world, included all the

human race then in existence. But when this preacher of righteousness was gone, the altar that he had erected to be a standing monitor of their dependence, was neglected, and his descendants by their neglect of the means of religion in a great measure lost that influencing sense of their dependence on God, which is so necessary to promote a good state of society. To admonish them for their vain and impious designs, the Ruler of Providence was pleased to *scatter them abroad*, and to call his more faithful servant, Abraham, that he and his descendants might be the repository of those divine communications which infinite wisdom and goodness saw were useful and necessary to keep alive a sense of religion in the hearts and lives of mankind; and this faithful patriarch, although now ninety years old, that he might evidence his faithfulness to his covenant with God, submitted to the painful seal of his engagement, to be the witness for God, to all generations. And that all the nations around them might be convinced of the truth of their religion, and importance of obedience to the commandments of the true God, Abraham and his descendants were evidently and wonderfully directed and blessed, by a constant series of divine providences.

After having thus borne witness for God among the Chaldeans many years, it was proper in the economy of the divine government, that these witnesses for the truth of God, should be led to a more conspicuous theatre to Egypt, which at this period was the most populous, wealthy, and scientific people in existence. To this nation was the knowledge of the true God made known, and the most instructive rites of religious worship were taught, for the space of four hundred

years. But when Egypt became subject to a king and a people who were unacquainted with the benefits of those religious sentiments which had formerly rendered that kingdom so prosperous and happy, they became the oppressors of the Israelites, and obliged them to flee from their persecutions: and under the immediate conduct of divine providence, they were led through the wilderness to the land of Canaan, that they might teach those idolatrous nations the knowledge of the true God. By these means, the nations of Greece who were distinguished for their literature, might be led to an acquaintance with the science of true religion. That by introducing the knowledge of the one living and true God into their seminaries of learning, their ethics might be refined, and their youth, trained up to a dependence on a holy God. That by thus purifying those fountains of knowledge, the Romans, who were become the most conspicuous nation, not only for their military prowess, but for their thirst for knowledge in arts and sciences, might derive from the literary institutions of Greece, not only the treasures of human science, but that knowledge of the character of the true God, which might reform their sanguinary morals, and inspire them with benevolence to their fellow men.— And this enterprising nation, having their minds thus enlightened, and their morals refined, might be the instruments in the hands of providence of spreading the purest system of morals and piety through all the nations with whom they had intercourse; that the populous nations of Europe might be led to compare the character of a holy Being, with the childish and licentious attributes recorded of their idols.

This appears to have been the state of religion for

the space of four thousand years. At length it pleased God, in his infinite wisdom, to usher in the last and most perfect dispensation of light and grace, which was established in the divine council, before the world was made ; which was promised to Adam ; foretold by enraptured prophets ; supported the faith of ancient believers, until at the fullness of the time divinely appointed. It was welcomed by the songs of angels ; proclaimed by a holy messenger from heaven ; and spread abroad by divinely inspired apostles, who sealed the truth of what they taught, with their own blood. This dispensation was to soften the hard heart ; to afford a hope to the penitent offender, that he might rely on the mercy of God, with the triumphant assurance of being accepted of him through Jesus Christ ; and cheered with full belief, that this blessed economy of grace and salvation, was to be spread to the remotest regions of the habitations of man.

The remote regions of Asia and Africa, although now enveloped in the thick clouds of heathen darkness, may yet be again enlightened by the beams of that gospel light, which once gave so much lustre to the cities of Ephesus, Galatia, Thyatira, and many others recorded in sacred history, where christian churches were once established by the ministry of Christ's apostles, filled with devout worshippers enlightened by the Holy Spirit, whose faith and hope was supported by their attendance upon the enlivening ordinances which Christ himself appointed to be the memorials of a glorified benefactor. We are encouraged to look for a blessing on that christian benevolence which is now spreading the sacred scriptures through all parts of the world ; so that even Asia and Africa may be again enlightened by

the acceptance of the truths of that gospel, which their fathers sinned against and lost. These are the means which give the best foundation to build our hopes of the blessed and glorious day : for although an omnipotent God, by an effort of his will, could and did create a world, and is equally able to send divine light, and subdue every heart to the most perfect submission ;—yet it has usually been the method of his providence ; to employ intelligent beings as his agents to communicate his mind to the understanding of intelligent beings.

It was in this way, that our Saviour himself, spread the knowledge of the gospel among the Jews and Gentiles. He sent out his disciples to preach the precepts and promises of the gospel ; and to support the truth of what they taught, they had the testimony of divine power always with them. These heavenly messengers were divinely inspired with the most perfect knowledge of the whole scheme of the gospel. But those who are now employed to preach this same gospel, are at best but imperfectly qualified ; imperfect in their knowledge, their faith, their piety ; they must therefore watch their own hearts, and study the sacred scriptures diligently and prayerfully, with a mind open to conviction of the truth. It was for this reason our Saviour calls his ministers his servants, his stewards, because they are to consider themselves as sent by him, and accountable to him how they perform their duty. If those who lived before the gospel day, under what may be considered as the twilight of religious knowledge, were accountable for the improvement of the light they enjoyed ; the knowledge of God, and their duty to him—what infinite responsibility lies upon those who enjoy the meridian beams of the gospel

day, when our Saviour challenges his ministers, to give an account of their stewardships: the demand was to reach the conscience, and sink into the heart with the most ardent desire to discover a well grounded hope of the blessed euge pronounced on a good and faithful servant.

The office of a gospel minister, gives a great and a painful pre-eminence to every other calling in society. A moment's reflection will convince any one that the work of the gospel ministry is various in its nature and duties; and an inspired apostle, under an impressive sense of its arduous importance, exclaims, "*who is sufficient for these things.*" How much more oppressive must it appear to a frail man, who finds himself subject to many infirmities! surrounded by temptations! So that nothing less than the supporting promise, "*my grace shall be sufficient for thee,*" could sustain his faith in the arduous labours that await him.

You my christian Friends, will easily believe that the solemn demand of our text, must sink into the very heart of that minister, who does realize its applicability to himself. How fleeting is time! This day completes *fifty years*, since standing in this desk, I heard of the duties, the labours, the hopes, the promises and rewards of a faithful Minister, all pourtrayed in the glowing language of an experienced teacher! Then too were heard all these considerations brought home, and personally applied, in a solemn, apostolic Charge, to be faithful to lead in the public acts of worship, to administer the christian ordinances, in short to approve himself a "faithful minister of Jesus Christ." This charge too fell from the lips, and came warm from the

heart of one, whose views were ripened by fifty years experience of the arduous labours, and trials which he was then enjoining upon his young successor.

How far the duties of that important trust have been fulfilled, is an inquiry which you, my friends, cannot feel indifferent to ;—but to him who accepted the trust, it is of more importance than any temporal concern, for it involves consequences of everlasting importance ! This consideration led our Saviour, who had the most perfect knowledge of human nature, to pronounce, “Blessed is that servant whom his Lord when he cometh shall find so doing.”

A minister's reflections upon a long life of faithfulness, gives not only present peace, but enables him to anticipate the more important retributions of eternity. If this was realized,—if it was duly impressed upon the heart ; of what avail would be the amusements of the world ? Riches, honours, or the applause of fellow men ? Would any such things induce a good minister to leave his charge, or to indulge negligence in his duty towards them ? How would the cares, or the blandishments of this life sink into insignificance, when set in opposition with the *Euge*, of well done good and faithful servant ? And yet such is the influence of things of time and sense, that even good men may, and do, frequently complain with the Apostle that “*to will is present to me, but how to perform in that which is good, I find not.*”

Conscious of the applicability of this complaint of the Apostle, I desire to express the grateful sense I feel of the candour with which my ministerial services have been received by the past and by the present generation. When upon a careful review I compare my performan-

ces with that perfection which the gospel requires, with that godly sincerity, that purity of intention, that diligence in studying the sacred Scriptures, and that faithful application of the penalties and promises of the gospel, my heart overflows with gratitude to that merciful Being who has provided an atonement for the priesthood as well as for the people: And I am thankful that upon this occasion I am able to say, that it has been my sincere desire to preach the gospel in its purity, as the wisdom of God and the power of God for the salvation of all who believe and obey it; that it has been my endeavour to persuade sinners to see and feel the necessity of an amendment of their evil ways,—to convince and establish those who were wavering, and to encourage those who were already convinced of the truth of christianity, to pursue higher degrees of knowledge and piety, until they arrive at the standard of perfect men in Jesus Christ.

And I now appeal to all, who with candid mind have attended on my ministry, to testify for me, that I have warned them of the danger of receiving any doctrine, that impeached the wisdom, the mercy, or the justice of God; that I have asserted at the same time that He has offered all the means that we need to enable us not only to escape final ruin, but to obtain eternal life. These truths I have endeavored to render, not only plain to the understanding, but convincing to the conscience and the heart.

And although some have appeared insensible to the truth and importance of our holy religion, yet we are thankful, that so many hearts have been awakened to feel its blessed impression, and with their whole souls have embraced its doctrines so as to evidence, that th

great Head of the Church has fulfilled his promised presence and grace with us.

In so much that during my ministry 575 persons have professed to have been so fully convinced of the truth and importance of the christian religion as to publicly bind themselves in covenant with this church to live by it ; of whom 121 have stately attended the ordinance of the Supper, and all of them who were parents have been led to embrace what they believed the duty and privilege of disciples of Christ, publicly to dedicate their infant children to God in the ordinance of baptism.— 1146 have received the seals of this covenant, of which 581 were males, and 565 females.

This proportion of the sexes evidences the constant care of a watchful Providence for the well being of society. This was very noticeable during the revolutionary war which cost the lives of so many young men.— For during that period and a term of about ten years afterward, we had fifty-three more male children baptized than females. Since that time the proportion has been but about half so great ; and this observation, I presume, will apply to all our towns.

But there is one fact, which regards the inhabitants of this town, which demands our grateful notice. The inhabitants of this town have been exposed in war and have been wonderfully preserved for a century past.— For although many were engaged in the French, and Indian wars in Canada, and in the revolutionary war from its very beginning, several of them being wounded at *Concord* and *Lexington*, and on *Bunker Hill*,— and though many of them continued in the service through all the campaigns of the war ; yet it is a wonderful fact, that none of the inhabitants of this town have been slain by the enemy in war !!

We cannot pretend however to have been exempted from the general law of mortality. If we look back fifty years, we can recollect many who have gone from our society. Some years have been more healthy than others. In the year 1778, the town contained 890 inhabitants ; from which number we buried 35, who were taken from us by the most distressing mortality that ever visited the place.

In 1783 with a population of 938, we lost but *four*. These two years exhibit the ~~two~~ extremes of mortality and health. In the space of *fifty years* past, the number of deaths has been 677 : Males 357, Females 320. 134 lived to above 70, which is 1 to 5—Females 95
 66 above 80 “ 1 to 10 “ 43
 19 “ 90 “ 1 to 40 “ 72
 2 “ 100 “ 1 to 388 “ 2

Thus the average number of deaths for fifty years has been 13 1-2. This with the present number of inhabitants would be *one* from every *eighty-four*.

In the year 1752 the third meeting-house—which is now used was erected. Then the number of inhabitants was 620. In 1776, it was 848 ; in 1783 it was 935 ; this year separated *Boxborough* with 154 inhabitants from *Stow*. Of 70 communicants, who belonged to our church 50 years ago, *one* only remains now living, and she a woman advanced to her 100th year.

Although we have generally been favored with health in our families, yet the present season is a sorrowful exception. Sickn^{ess} is now frequent ; death has desolated many families. Since the tenth of September last we have lost two in old age, three in youth, and thirteen under three years. Such dispensations are intended to awaken our attention to consider the frailty

of life, and to make us feel our dependence on a watchful Providence.

Those families, who have been spared, should consider the goodness, with which they have been distinguished, and, when they look upon their surviving children, should apply to themselves the solemn charge, which the daughter of Pharaoh gave to the mother of Moses; "*Take this child and nurse [educate] it for me.*"

Parents have the most favorable, if not the only opportunity, to implant those principles, which form the character for life; and it is of importance, that they realize, that their peace of conscience here, and their hope of heaven hereafter, must depend on the faithful performance of the duties of this interesting relation. Since the separation of this endeared relation is no uncommon event, it is of importance that parents should realize it, and that when their children are removed from them by sudden death, they should *in heart and in public covenant*, have dedicated and given them up to that merciful Being from whom they received them; then if their lives are spared, they may be a comfort and an honor to their parents, and a blessing to society.

So when parents are called to take their leave of the world, to think they shall leave those behind them, who will honor their memories by their benevolence to men, and their piety to God, is a consoling thought,—and to expect the time will come when the endearing ties of natural affection shall be purified and refined from the imperfection of mortality, and when their most ardent desires shall be gratified, in embraces of their dear relatives, greatly enhanced by the assurance, that they

shall be separated no more ! Blessed prospect ! Happy is it for parents who have treasured up supports for such a season !—And happy for that Minister who has been called usefully to witness such interesting scenes of domestic trials, and can appeal to the bleeding hearts of his people to join their testimony to that of his own conscience that his heart and his tongue have been successfully devoted to alleviate the sorrows of such a painful moment ! who has made it the study of his heart to bring to the believing, afflicted heart, those consolations which the promises of the Gospel only can afford !

What a variety of duty must the aged Minister have been called to—sometimes to hear the plaint of those who have outlived their days of usefulness and the enjoyment of life, to assist them to review the mercies as well as the sorrows of their pilgrimage ! to see how they are prepared to resign the cares of this world by the hope of a better inheritance in the world above ! How often has he been called to those on a bed of sickness, who are taken from the active, and sometimes the most useful employments in society, to assist them to believe that God does not grieve nor afflict us but for our good, and to encourage us to raise our fainting hearts and hopes in prayer to that merciful Being, who is able and ready to remove or sanctify all our sufferings.

At other times he is called to attend a still more solemn service, the last moments of the dying ; to witness the lingering hopes of life, the trembling hopes and fears of death ! To realize that with them time is ending, eternity is opening ; a few more sighs, and they must realize the retributive justice of a holy God in a

state of happiness or misery. Then is he called to lead the trembling believer to look through faith to the Saviour, and from his heart to say, my lord, and my God! And how often in the course of a long life, must the affectionate minister have been called to weep with those who experience the painful sensations which so often happen in this dying world ! This is the time to exercise all the tender sympathy of a friend, and all the consolations, which the most enlightened christian can bring from his head and heart—to encourage the afflicted mourner to look beyond this cloudy atmosphere of mortality to those abodes of life and peace which are lasting as the immortal soul.

Happy that minister who can reflect upon such assistance from the divine spirit that he has been enabled to bring from his memory and from his heart those treasures of knowledge and grace, which infinite goodness has provided, to enlighten in the wisdom of God, and to engage the whole soul to embrace the offers of the gospel of salvation by Jesus Christ.

Looking back thus on a period of Fifty years, reviving such various scenes of duty, naturally brings up the remembrance of those, whose faces were once familiar in this house, by whose affectionate invitation I was encouraged to undertake to promote the cause of that dispensation which Jesus commissioned his apostles to preach, to promote those celestial habits which are the brightest ornaments in life and afford the most supporting hopes in death. But where are those friends of my early life and labours ? They, who evinced so lively a concern for the peace, and religious improvement of this society ? They who once felt the importance of those duties, we have been reviewing, are now

gone, one after another, to the recompense of eternity, until only *four* of them remain, and but one of them in active life! Our fathers where are they! Gone to give an account of their improvement of the means of grace! while the person whom they encouraged and assisted to undertake their religious instruction, and to instruct their descendants is continued to this day!— Although it is found by observation of the ways of providence, that the average of the life of a minister of the gospel falls short of thirty years!

“The Prophets, do they live forever?” Since I have been here, every minister has been removed by death from the neighboring churches. I have attended the settlement of the third, in many, and of the fourth in succession in three instances!! These dispensations show to us all, the uncertainty of life, even of those we are ready to consider as the most useful servants of the cause of God, and seem to call survivors, “*Be ye also ready,*” since now is the only time to secure the reward of a good and faithful servant.

And now my christian Friends, as I have spent the activity of youth, and the vigor of manhood in attending to the duties of public and domestic religious improvement for nearly two generations, suffer me to appeal to your hearts, to join with the testimony of my own conscience, that by a serious review of life, I have not been insensible to the calls of christian friendship, and ministerial duty. That I have endeavoured to sustain the faith and hope of those, who were waiting to be delivered from the infirmities and pains of feeble old age, to suggest the supports of the gospel to those whose hearts were fainting under wasting sickness, or ready to sink under deep sorrows! And to encourage

the dying christian to attend to that merciful promise,
“ I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.”

Assist me by your prayers to review these scenes with improvement, to realize that with me the day is far spent, and the night is near at hand, in which no more work can be done. That my strength must ere long fail, my ability for public usefulness be spent; even my personal comfort be gone. Let me be cheered with the hope that you will not forsake the *“ Levite when he is old ;”* but that you will remember the labours of his active life, to comfort his heart in those days of infirmity which so commonly attend old age!— And, indulge him in the hope, that after his voice shall be heard no more from this sacred desk, that you will recal the advice of an aged, affectionate friend, who sincerely wishes your good for time and eternity. Study the things that make for peace, whereby one may edify another. Think how good and how pleasant we have found it, for brethren to dwell together in unity. How it has promoted our domestic, civil and religious enjoyments. We who are now old can compare the state of society as it was formerly, with what it is now ! The great improvements in the useful arts ; the flourishing state of our agriculture and manufactures ; the science of moral government, the improvements in our municipal concerns, to prevent immorality, and to promote habits of industry and virtue, the success of which encourages persevering exertion to perfect what is still needful.

But we should notice the improvements in the important science of education with peculiar gratitude.— The former inhabitants of this town, like the other descendants of the pilgrims, felt the importance of early

schooling for their children. But the primary schools so called, were formerly intrusted to the care of those who at this day would be considered as very incompetent for the business; and they were hired for so short periods, as to promise but very little improvement. But even these advantages have been so far successful as to render the minds of many, capable of seeing the benefits others have derived from better education.

These considerations encouraged a number of the inhabitants of this town, from the fruit of their own industry, to erect an elegant, classic house; hire a well educated Instructor, under whose care their children are now obtaining more enlarged and correct knowledge of the principles of literature; more elevated ideas of the laws of the natural, and of the moral world; that by learning more of the wisdom and goodness of the great Creator, as displayed in the works of nature their hearts may be better disposed to submit to, and embrace the wise and merciful dispensation of grace and salvation by Jesus Christ.

And as to the harmony of our religious society, I desire to thank God, this gives us a pre-eminent standing in society around us. It is with lively gratitude I can now reflect, that I have been directed not to dwell on those doctrines which were more effectual to make division than to promote peace and godliness. That instead of perplexing your minds with visionary speculations, I have made it my study to preach those christian doctrines which are calculated to promote the freedom of the mind—to enlarge the heart, to sweeten the passions, and to unite all christians in the bonds of love, hereby to glorify our heavenly Father. In this way it has been my endeavour to declare, what appeared to

me to be the whole council of God, and this with fervent exhortation to obedience.

And now my Friends, from an affectionate concern for your temporal and eternal welfare, may you never be destitute of an enlightened, pious, christian minister. Think of your own personal improvement, in knowledge and piety—think of the importance to the rising generation, prayerfully seek such a blessing. And may the God of peace take you and your descendants under the protection and guidance of his holy spirit, that we may all be prepared to join the society of the church triumphant above.

APPENDIX.

THE town of Stow was incorporated in the month of May, 1683, and in 1699, the Church was embodied, and Mr. JOHN EV-
ELETH ordained, who continued with them 17 years. And on the 18th of November, 1720, Rev. JOHN GARDNER was ordained, whose life and labours were continued 55 years.—On the eleventh day of October, 1774, the present incumbent was ordained colleague with the aged Mr. Gardner.

Since the incorporation of the town, 2492 have been baptized ; 330 have been admitted to full communion. In 1686 the first meeting-house was erected by 37 inhabitants, and a house for a minister. 1713, the second meeting-house was built. 1752, the number of inhabitants had increased to 620, when they erected the third, which is our present house.

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